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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT JAGDEO TO EMBARK ON MIDDLE EAST TOUR

¶1. (SBU) Summary: President Bharrat Jagdeo has announced that he will travel to several Middle Eastern countries beginning on March 20, with his visit centered around the March 31 Second Summit of Arab-South American Countries in Qatar. Other countries on the planned itinerary include Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Cyprus. This regional tour follows on the heels of a trip Jagdeo took to Libya in mid-January, where he was received by President Qaddafi, as well as recent remarks by Jagdeo and other GoG officials deploring the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza and Palestine. Jagdeo affirms that he seeks improved social and investment links with the region, but also likely wishes to identify potential new sources of financial assistance in the face of the economic slowdown afflicting western donor nations. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) At a recent Muslim holiday celebration in Georgetown, President Jagdeo announced that he would commence a multi-country tour of the Middle East on March 20. (Note: Jagdeo made no reference to the specific countries he would visit, but post learned from the MFA that the current schedule includes stops in Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Cyprus, and Qatar, where Jagdeo will attend the Second Summit of Arab-South American Countries on March 31. End Note.) Affirming his desire to "pursue better relationships" with the countries and peoples of the region, Jagdeo highlighted the need for Guyana to seek out potential new sources of foreign investment due to the economic crisis afflicting most western nations, asserting "we have to flow with the tide."

¶3. (U) The upcoming tour comes on the heels of Jagdeo's trip to Libya in mid-January, where he met with President Mohamar Qaddafi and other senior Libyan government officials to discuss areas of possible bilateral cooperation. This was followed by a late February visit to Guyana by several representatives from the Libyan Trade and Investment Agency, in which the parties discussed potential Libyan investments in agriculture, forestry, and hydropower. Guyana's government media agency reported that during Jagdeo's January visit to Tripoli, the two sides agreed that Libya would open a Libyan People's Bureau in Georgetown. The media also reported that Jagdeo lobbied Libya for a write-off of its bilateral debt, although no agreement was reached.

¶4. (SBU) Jagdeo and other senior officials have also been making frequent references in recent months to the humanitarian crises in Gaza and Palestine, with several GoG ministers even participating in a small, mid-January march outside the Embassy that protested U.S. support for Israel. Donald Ramotar, Secretary General of Jagdeo's party, in a public speech at a recent celebration of International Women's Day went so far as to say that the women of Palestine and Gaza "carry a cross and burden heavier than that which Jesus Christ bore." This strong stance represents a shift for a government traditionally averse to commenting on highly

sensitive international political issues, and could be an attempt to curry favor with countries for which the plight of the Palestinian people is a foreign policy priority.

15. (U) Jagdeo's consistent globetrotting since December 2008 has included separate trips to Poland (for a UN Climate Change Conference), the Mediterranean (the Libya trip included a stop in Greece), northern Europe (to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos and address climate change issues in Oslo, where he met with the Norwegian Prime Minister), and Washington (to speak at two climate change-related programs). This is in addition to his standard Caribbean affairs-related travel, which most recently involved a Heads of Government meeting in Belize. Jagdeo is widely perceived as eager to burnish his international credentials, and his ability to articulate a vision on climate change has garnered him accordant attention. However, this trip to the Middle East is expected to focus principally on Guyana's economic needs amidst the ongoing global turbulence.

16. (SBU) Comment: After boldly asserting in 2008 that his government had constructed a "firewall" to protect Guyana's economy from significant external shocks, Jagdeo and his Cabinet have sounded an increasingly alarmist tone in recent weeks. Jagdeo appears to believe that the global economic crisis will diminish western donor nations' appetite and capacity for funding endeavors in Guyana and similar nations, and with this trip seeks to explore additional sources of potential investment and/or assistance. The Middle East is a natural fit for new outreach, with Guyana's considerable

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Muslim population and long-standing membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The country's consistent willingness to accept financial and/or other forms of aid from virtually any available source -- even neighboring Venezuela, which officially claims two-thirds of Guyana's territory, is a benefactor through PetroCaribe -- means this is probably not the last of Jagdeo's overseas adventures. End Comment.
Jones